

Statement by Blair Ewing on the FY03 Capital and Operating Budgets
May 16, 2002

The Capital Budget

This capital budget reflects priorities that shortchange the public schools.

It provides funds for the Montrose Parkway -- a road that will only lead to added congestion because it authorizes far more development in North Bethesda, and will dump all its additional traffic onto the already overcrowded Rockville Pike.

And those funds could, instead, have been used in substantial part for school construction and modernization and for added buses and new bus service in rush hour to make buses more frequent and more convenient within a year.

For that reason I do not support the capital budget. It makes the wrong choices.

While there are funds in the budget for schools from the State, from county funds, and from the recordation tax, we are still hundreds of millions of dollars short of doing what we ought to do.

We will have still more students in portable classrooms. We have crumbling buildings all over the county that do not meet building code and fire code requirements. Dozens and dozens of buildings are overcrowded. While the recordation tax adds an estimated \$16 million, that's only about 2 per cent of the real need. We are not catching up. Despite our best efforts we are still falling behind. We are simply unable to keep up with the pace of development.

This budget is exhibit one in the case against rampant development. The conventional wisdom is that residential development pays for itself. It does not, as evidenced by overcrowded and crumbling schools, insufficient fire and police coverage, and insufficient funds for health and social services.

There is another issue with the capital budget as well. The plan for the expenditure of the revenues from the newly enacted recordation tax came to the Council yesterday afternoon, in the form of a staff-developed spread sheet, with the expectation that we would vote for the projects on that spread sheet today.

There has never been a motion before the Council on this subject, there has never been Council discussion on this subject. This is totally at variance with the way the Council has addressed budgets. We have taken the following steps: 1) introduction of a proposal, 2) a public hearing, 3) Committee discussion and consideration, 4) a formal committee recommendation is brought to the full Council for its consideration before a vote is taken, and, finally, 5) reconciliation at the end of the budget process. Steps 1 through 4 simply did not occur.

The Education Committee discussed but did not bring to the Council the addition of elementary gyms. The presentation by the Chair of the Education Committee of the operating budget referred to gyms and to labs at Richard Montgomery, but when the Council voted to accept the report, it was accepting the report as presented in writing concerning the operating budget, not the capital budget. There were no recommendations in the formal proposal about the capital budget funds likely to result from the recordation tax.

The first time a majority of the Council saw the specific recommendations was on Wednesday afternoon in a spreadsheet that offered no justification or discussion of the proposal. The Council members were told that they were to vote on this on Thursday, today.

This is a violation of the expectations I have, and I would think, all Council members ought to have, about how we make decisions.

I would have liked the opportunity to discuss what we ought to do with these funds, not only in FY03 but in the five succeeding years. The list of actions does not reflect my priorities. I want funding for Richard Montgomery High School, not just \$600,000 for labs, but for the construction of a new school building. I want funding for other schools, including Kensington-Parkwood, and Cresthaven. I want the opportunity to talk about those issues, to hear what the possibilities are, and to take votes. I might win or lose on any specific project. But this process does not allow me or others on the Council even to be heard on this subject.

I will be told, no doubt, that these projects merely reflect what the Board of Education wants. Even if that were true, that does not mean that I have ceded my right to make another decision. And it also does not mean that I am prepared to have other Council members make that decision for me. This is a body where the majority rules, not one or two or three people.

This package should have been brought to the whole Council for discussion, deliberation and decision.

I would move to postpone the matter of decisions on the package of school capital projects to be paid for by the recordation tax until such time as the full Council can consider and deliberate on the recommendations.

The Operating Budget

I will vote to approve the operating budget, but with a strong sense of disappointment and dismay.

We remain, with this budget, far from where we ought to be. While the school budget is reasonably well funded, there are still major shortfalls in funding for further expansion of early childhood, Head Start and all-day kindergarten programs. There are still far too many large classes, although we have made some progress.

This budget does not even maintain the status quo for health services for those with mental illness and with disabilities. The budget cuts funds for mental health outpatient clinics in half, from \$1,270,000 in FY02 to \$600,000 in FY03. This budget reduces the local funds for those who provide services to those with disabilities by one-third, or roughly \$2 million. While I will bring forward supplementals in FY03 to restore these funds, there is still no certainty that those proposals will receive approval.

The Recreation Department experiences in the budget many reductions. Neither police nor fire manpower is increased by this budget, despite continuing population growth. Legacy Open Space funds were partly restored, but are still less than the plan. And one could continue through the budget along these lines.

I know that there is reduced revenue, and that the Executive and Council believe that justifies these reductions. But I do not find much cause to rejoice in this budget, and I have no illusions that we are meeting all of the real and rising needs in our County.